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ANOTHER LOSS FOR THE LAND-GRAB CAMPAIGN

Amid vigorous public lands activism, Representative Mark Amodei, a leader of the right-wing land transfer movement, retreats.

JIMMY TOBIAS · MAY 22, 2017

The land grab campaign is coming up empty.

For years now, a small group of activists and legislators have sought to transfer millions of acres of federal public land to the control of right-wing state and local governments in the American West. They've attempted to seize—to steal—the national forests, wildlife refuges, and Bureau of Land Management parcels that belong to all of us. In the course of their labors, these folks have fought hard to convince the American people (and themselves) that the land transfer idea has public support. But it never did, and it doesn't now. As a result, land transfer has largely failed.

This fundamental reality was confirmed once again last week when Representative Mark Amodei of Nevada, one of the strongest supporters of land transfer in Congress, took a big step back from the idea.

In an interview with the *Reno Gazette-Journal*, Amodei announced that he has no plans during the current legislative session to reintroduce his Honor the Nevada Enabling Act, a bill that sought to unload well over seven million acres of federal public land to the Nevada state government. Amodei, a conservative Republican, had introduced the bill in a previous session of Congress, but it went nowhere. Now, it appears to be permanently defunct.

Amodei, in his interview with the *Gazette-Journal*, explained his decision to drop the bill like this: "Transferring millions of acres of public lands ... is not something I think the majority of people think is a good idea." That's true of course—56 percent of people in seven Western states oppose transferring national lands to state ownership, according to Colorado College's 2017 State of the Rockies poll. But people don't just *think* land transfer is a bad deal, they are *actively organizing* to stop it.

Indeed, the Congressman's retreat from his hardline land-grab bill comes amid a season of renewed and passionate activism on behalf of our public forests, grasslands, deserts, and more. The #KeepItPublic movement, as it is known, has seen hunters, anglers, backpackers, bikers, outdoor gear companies, and many other pro-conservation factions across the American West exert their political muscle with stunning impact.

The movement has blossomed in Utah, where another Republican Congressman, Jason Chaffetz, was also forced to drop a land transfer bill earlier this year due to intense pressure from the state's sportsmen and conservationists.

It is in Montana, where 1,000 people rallied in the state capital in January to oppose land transfer and where the Democratic candidate in the special congressional election is running on a strong #KeepItPublic platform.

It is in Colorado, where the legislature last year passed a bill to create the nation's first ever "Public Lands Day," a state holiday meant to celebrate the economic, social, and political importance of the public lands.

And it has taken root in Amodei's home state too. In mid-February, for instance, the Nevada Wildlife Commission held a public hearing on the Congressman's land transfer bill in order to solicit input from residents across the state. Conservationists, sportsmen, students, and more showed up in force.

"There was a huge turnout directly opposing Amodei's bill," says Ryan Hughes, a student and public lands activist who recently founded a Backcountry Hunters and Anglers chapter at the University of Nevada-Reno. "A lot of people went up to the podium and told the commission why they opposed public land transfer. It was very powerful. Everyone was on the same page."

In the end, the wildlife commission, which oversees the Nevada Department of Wildlife, voted to send a letter to Amodei articulating the deep hostility to his bill among hunters, anglers, and conservationists in the state.

After that vote, Hughes says, "Amodei started reading the writing on the wall."

The writing on the wall states plainly: Land transfer is in retreat.